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Sverrir Jakobsson
University of Iceland

From Charismatic Power to State Power: The Political History of Iceland 1096—1281

During the 11th century, Iceland was in a unique position compared to most European countries in terms of its political structure. It had no executive power and no territorial authority, neither secular nor ecclesiastical. The law was not written, but instead recited in the parliament by a person known as the "law-speaker" (Old Norse, hereinafter ON, *lögsögumaðr*) during a three-year span, over a one-third of each year. The institutions common to the country were the legal system and the parliament, where the law was recited and the courts held their meetings, one court for each quarter of the country. The parliamentary representatives were the farmers who paid dues for the administration thereof (ON *þingfararkaupsbændur*) and attended it along with their leaders, the chieftains. These due-paying farmers were probably a great majority of all farmers in the country, rather than an elite, but only one in nine was to attend the parliament each year, and this 11% probably constituted an elite among farmers.[1] The main function of a chieftain was to nominate farmers to sit in the courts, but he also had a considerable amount of informal power. He was the acknowledged leader of a group of farmers who had to declare themselves the followers (ON *þing*) of a single chieftain. As it was possible for farmers to change allegiance, the chieftains had to be energetic and charismatic to hold on to their followers. Although the position of chieftain was an inherited one, it did not necessarily pass on to a son of a chieftain, rather to the one among his male relatives who was considered to have the greatest ability to perform the functions of a chieftain. The system thus had both democratic

[1] See S. Jakobsson: *From Reciprocity to Manorialism: On the Peasant Mode of Production in Medieval Iceland*. "Scandinavian Journal of History" 2013, Vol. 38, pp. 1—23.

and meritocratic attributes, although a noble ancestry was clearly important as well.[2]

Christianity was introduced to Iceland in 999, but the evolution of the Church as an institution was a slow process. In the 11th century the Church as an institution was represented by missionary bishops operating in different parts of the country, but its hierarchical organisational structures were still not in place. There was no see in Iceland until Gizur Ísleifsson, who became bishop in 1082, decided to turn his ancestral farm at Skálholt into a see. Gizur Ísleifsson was also the first bishop of the country who did not have to share his authority with any other missionary bishop. It was during his time in the office that the Church in Iceland came of age and the institutional framework for its operation was created.[3] This happened in the parliament in 1096 and 1097, with the introduction of the tithe.

The tithe was the first genuine tax introduced in Iceland, and it was instrumental in the evolution of the Church as an organisation. This evolution contained a territorial hierarchy, the first of its kind in Iceland. Thus, the introduction of the tithe was the beginning of a metamorphosis of Icelandic society, which gradually lost its anarchic and idiosyncratic features and became more akin to other European societies. This process was finalised with the integration of Iceland into the realm of Norway and the introduction of a law code, Jónsbók, which formed the basis of all legislation in Iceland for centuries to come.[4]

In the following paragraphs, the causes and processes of this evolution will be analysed. What was the role of the Church in introducing a new mode of thinking about power, with more emphasis on institutional and territorial authority rather than individual and charismatic power? When did secular lords decide to follow suit, and what made the circumstances favourable to their ambition? How did this change in power relations affect Icelandic society and why did integration into the Norwegian kingdom become the most plausible solution to internal power struggle? The introduction of state power in Iceland was due to many and various factors, some of which I regard as more instrumental than others in procuring this outcome.

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[2] On chieftains in medieval Iceland, see G. Karlsson: *Goðar og bændur*. "Saga" 1972, Vol. 10, pp. 5—58; L. Ingvarsson: *Goðorð og goðorðsmenn* I—III. Egilsstöðum 1986—1987; G. Karlsson: *Goðamenning. Staða og áhrif goðorðsmanna í þjóðveldi Íslendinga*. Reykjavík 2004; J.V. Sigurðsson: *Frá goðorðum til ríkja. Þróun goðavalds á 12. og 13. öld*. "Sagnfræðirannsóknir" 1989, Vol. 10.

[3] See O. Vésteinsson: *The Christianization of Iceland. Priests, Power, and Social Change 1000—1300*. Oxford 2000.

[4] See S. Jakobsson: *The Process of State-Formation in Medieval Iceland*. "Viator. Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies" Autumn 2009, Vol. 40(2), pp. 151—170; B. Þorsteinsson, S. Líndal: *Lögfesting konungsvalds*. "Saga Íslands" 1978, Vol. 3, pp. 19—108.

The following overview of political developments in Iceland between 1096 and 1281, must necessarily be imperfect. I can here give only the general conclusions at which I have arrived, with a few facts in illustration, but which, I hope, in most cases will suffice.

Clerics and the reshaping of Icelandic society

The introduction of the tithe in the Icelandic parliament in 1096 (or 1097) was regarded by the historian Ari Þorgilsson, usually showing restraint in his opinions, as "a great miracle" (ON *miklar jarteinir*). The novelty of this decision and the effects of it on Icelandic society did in fact merit the pre-eminence Ari gave the issue in his *Book of Icelanders* (ON *Íslendingabók*) which was composed in the 1130s. Ari was a student and foster-son of Teitr Ísleifsson, the brother of Gizur Ísleifsson, and an ardent admirer of the bishop. As both the *Book of Icelanders* and his own *vita* in Hungurvaka suggest, Gizur must have been a very charismatic figure, and he was able to garner support for the tithe far and wide.[5] In the parliament he had two very influential supporters. One was the law-speaker Markús Skeggjason who was an impassioned supporter of this reform. The other was the priest Sæmundr Sigfússon who, like Gizur, had studied abroad. It was in fact Sæmundr who introduced the legislation about the tithe in the parliament, though he did not hold a formal office comparable to that of the bishop or the law-speaker.

Gizur Ísleifsson and Sæmundr Sigfússon both belonged to a very small group of Icelanders who had studied abroad. Gizur had learned in Saxony and Sæmundr either in France or in the Franconia region in the Holy Roman Empire, but it might be inferred that both of them had received a similar education, common to the clerical elite in Western Europe. This involved a knowledge of Latin grammar but also that of the works read by students of Latin in Europe, the classical curriculum. Through their foreign studies, Gizur and Sæmundr became innovators within a traditional society. The law-speaker Markús Skeggjason was also a man of foreign connections; he composed skaldic poetry about King Erik of Denmark (the years 1095—1103). This band of influential persons managed to persuade the rest of the farmers in the parliament to go

[5] On Gizur and other early Icelandic bishops, see Á. Jakobsson: *Byskupskjör á Íslandi: Stjórnmálaviðhorf byskupasagna og Sturlungu*. "Studia theologica islandica" 2000, Vol. 14, pp. 171—182; Idem: *Hinn fullkomni karlmaður: Ímyndarsköpun fyrir biskupa á 13. öld*. "Studia theologica islandica" 2007, Vol. 25, pp. 119—130.

along with their novel ideals; thus creating a new organisation, a territorial and hierarchical Icelandic Church.

Ari Þorgilsson was an enthusiastic supporter of the tithe, but also of the new learning. The *Book of Icelanders* is one of the earliest texts composed in Iceland, utilising the Latin alphabet, which was a considerable novelty at the time. Bypassing completely the runic alphabet, Icelanders became early adaptors of the Latin script which was adjusted to the complex Old Norse vocal system in *The First Grammatical Treatise*, written sometime in the first half of the 12th century. Along with Ari, Sæmundr Sigfússon was an example of an Icelandic cleric who utilised this medium in historical and scientific texts, in contrast to Gizur Ísleifsson who was a charismatic teacher of an earlier tradition, teaching by word and example (Latin *verbo et exemplo*).[6]

The adaptation of literacy had social and political repercussions. An early example of textualisation was the putting down of the laws in writing which was done by the chieftain Hafliði Másson, a son-in-law of Teitr Ísleifsson. This enterprise is praised in the *Book of Icelanders*, understandably, as Ari Þorgilsson and Hafliði Másson were parts of the same closely-knit network, connected to the family of Gizur Ísleifsson. The codification of the law rendered the office of the law-speaker obsolete. In 13th-century copies of the written law it is even stipulated that if the legal texts are not unanimous, the text belonging to the bishops should be regarded as the authoritative source. It thus seems that the said codification resulted in the only secular office in Iceland becoming useless. And yet the parliament continued to elect law-speakers who had to adapt to the loss of their former role.[7]

The withdrawal of the functions of a secular office to a clerical one seems like a shift in the balance of power between laymen and the Church, but it would not have appeared so to the leading people of Iceland in the early 12th century. On the contrary, it was not unusual for the same person to wield both secular and ecclesiastical authority. For instance, both Sæmundr Sigfússon and Ari Þorgilsson combined the role of the priest with that of a chieftain.[8] Their clerical teaching was evidently a supplement to their leadership of men in parliamentary disputes, and in enforcing the verdict of the secular courts which could only be done with force. Evidently the role of a priest was not seen as

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[6] On the historical writings of Ari and Sæmundr, see B. Guðnason: *Um Skjöldungasögu*. Reykjavík 1963; S. Karlsson: *Fróðleiksgreinar frá tólftu öld*. "Afmælsirit Jóns Helgasonar" 30. júní 1969, pp. 328—349.

[7] See G. Sigurðsson: *Bók í stað lögsögumanns — Valdabarátta kirkju og veraldlegra höfðingja?* "Sagnaþing helgað Jónasi Kristjánssyni sjötugum 10. apríl 1994" 1994, Vol. 1, pp. 207—232.

[8] On Ari and Sæmundr, see E. Arnórsson: *Ari fróði*. Reykjavík 1942; E.Ó. Sveinsson: *Á ártíð Ara fróða*. "Skírnir" 1948, Vol. 122, pp. 30—49; H. Hermannsson: *Sæmund Sigfússon and the Oddaverjar*. "Islandica" 1932, Vol. 22.

radically different from that of a secular chieftain. This is still evident in the early 13th-century kings' sagas contained in *Morkinskinna* where the Norwegian king claims that Gizur Ísleifsson is equally competent to be either a bishop or a Viking. Although coming from a relatively late source, this anecdote might reflect 11th-century attitudes towards clerical statesmen such as Gizur. The clerical reformers of the late 11th and early 12th centuries would have been horrified, but their message had yet to gain ground in distant Iceland. In 1143 almost half of the chieftains in Iceland had also been consecrated as priests, according to a list composed by Ari Þorgilsson himself.

In 1153 the Archdiocese of Nidaros was founded in Trondheim. Icelanders became subject to the new archbishop who wanted to have a more active role in the Church's policies in Iceland. This became very notable after the accession of Archbishop Eysteinn Erlendsson in 1161, a man of Icelandic descent who had studied in Paris among the Victorines. Eysteinn championed clerical reform in Iceland, with particular emphasis on violence against clerics, the Church's control over its property, and the institution of marriage. In 1178, the newly consecrated Bishop Þorlákr Þórhallsson was given the task of enforcing this agenda in Iceland. Þorlákr had some success, he wrote a penitential for various moral offenses and he managed to get some chieftains to grant him formal (if not actual) control of ecclesiastical property. In many instances, his efforts were resisted by the secular elite. In 1180, Archbishop Eysteinn wrote a letter admonishing the five greatest lords of Iceland for their practice of concubinage, including Jón Loftsson and Gizur Hallsson, whom he singles out in the letter.[9] It is not clear whether he regarded Jón and Gizur as having erred more egregiously in this matter than other chieftains, more likely he regarded them as likely supporters of the agenda of the Church, as they had been prominent supporters of Þorlákr's predecessor, Bishop Klængr Þorsteinsson. In late sources, the focus is on Þorlákr's quarrels with Jón Loftsson but according to earlier sources he seems to have focused his efforts on another chieftain, Þórðr Böðvarsson, whom he excommunicated in the parliament for an illicit liaison with a woman related to him.

The father of Þórðr, Böðvar Þórðarson, and his son-in-law, Sturla Þórðarson, had clashed with Bishop Þorlákr on another issue, when they had an inheritance dispute with the priest Páll Sölvason, who had in fact been one of the prime contenders when Þorlákr was elected bishop. Þorlákr granted Páll the right to bear arms to defend himself against Sturla and Böðvar, men that the bishop regarded as "powerful and cold-hearted" (ON *ríkir menn ok kaldráðir*).

[9] See S. Rafnsson: *Þorlaksskriftir og húskapur á 12. og 13. öld* "Saga" 1982, Vol. 20, pp. 114—129; G.Á. Grímsdóttir: *Um afskipti erkibiskupa af íslenzkum málefnum á 12. og 13. öld*. "Saga" 1982, Vol. 20, pp. 28—62. On the institution of concubinage, see in particular A.G. Magnúsdóttir: *Frillor och fruar. Politik och samlevnad på Island 1120—1400*. Gothenburg 2001.

But the issue was a difficult one, as it brought to light the problems of clerics engaging in secular quarrels. In a society without executive power how was a priest supposed to enforce parliamentary verdicts in the same manner as that expected of a chieftain? There must have been some exchange of correspondence between Bishop Þorlákr and the archbishop, but the issue was not resolved until after the accession of Archbishop Eiríkr Ívarsson in 1188. In 1190 he sent a letter to Iceland, where he placed a ban on priests wielding secular offices, such as a chieftaincy. This was an important step in the separation of clerical and secular powers in Iceland.

In his last years, Bishop Þorlákr invited the chieftain Gizur Hallsson to manage the affairs of the see of Skálholt. Gizur was the grandson of Teitr Ísleifsson and a chieftain but did not serve as a priest. Instead, he had spent some time at the court in Norway and served as the king's chamberlain (ON *stallari*). Nevertheless, Gizur is described in contemporary sources as "the best cleric of anyone in this country" (ON *hinn besti klerkur þeirra er hér á landi hafa verið*).[10] The term cleric indicates a Latin education, and indeed Gizur has been associated with the translation of works such as *Rómverja saga* and *Veraldar saga*. More importantly, he was instrumental in giving a new role to the office of the law-speaker, an office which he held for 20 years. From the time of Gizur Hallsson onwards, law-speakers were associated with literacy and book-learning rather than the memorising connected with the office when learning in Iceland was predominantly oral. Gizur combined his clerical education and his role in the parliament with a close relationship to the see of Skálholt. When Bishop Þorlákr died in 1193, Gizur Hallsson was the one entrusted with his funeral oration, perhaps due to rhetorical training associated with Latin learning.

Consolidation

The brother-in-law of Gizur Hallsson, Guðmundr Þorvaldsson, lived in North Iceland, at the farm Bakki in Hörgárdalur. In 1190 he had acquired control of two chieftaincies and used this power to abolish the spring parliament in the region of Eyjafjörðr.[11] The pretext was that he wished to avoid conflict

[10] *Sturlunga saga*, Vol. 1—2. Eds. J. Jóhannesson, M. Finnbogason, K. Eldjárn. Reykjavík 1946, Vol. 1, p. 60.

[11] *Sturlunga saga*, Vol. 1, p. 170.

in the parliament; Guðmundr was putting himself forward as a strongman who could be a better guarantor of peace than the intricate system of spring parliaments and quarterly courts in the parliament. This consolidation of power proved to be final, the chieftaincies of Guðmundr were henceforth held by a single individual who ruled as a lord over this region.

A similar development can be seen at work a few years earlier in the neighbouring district at Skagafjörðr. The chieftain Kolbeinn Tumason had become "lord of Skagafjörðr" (ON *höfðingi í Skagafirði*) at a young age, and relied on the support of his mother Þuríðr, the daughter of Gizur Hallsson, and her second husband, the chieftain Sigurðr Ormsson, who resided at Svínafell in East Iceland but stood in for Kolbeinn when he was absent on travel abroad.[12] That there was an alliance between the upcoming lords in Skagafjörðr and Eyjafjörðr can be demonstrated by the military assistance both Sigurðr and Kolbeinn offered Guðmundr on various occasions. This seems to have been a close-knit family united by the connection to Gizur Hallsson.

The rise of a power block connected with Gizur Hallsson was counterbalanced by the rise of other families in the rest of the country. Jón Loftsson had been a powerful politician and dominated the Icelandic parliament in the 1170s and 1180s. In the 1190s each of his three sons had become chieftain in his own right, mainly through alliances with other important families in the region between Þjórsá and Jökulsá also known as Rangárþing.[13] In the parliaments in 1196 and 1197, Sæmundr Jónsson, the foremost of the sons of Jón Loftsson, was the chief opponent of the chieftains connected to Gizur Hallsson, and in 1200 there was actually a standoff between Sæmundr and Sigurðr Ormsson who controlled neighbouring regions. Sæmundr seems to have benefitted from his control of a more prosperous region which gave him the ability to assemble more manpower. At this time he was regarded as the most powerful chieftain in Iceland, but the alliance connecting Gizur Hallsson and his Northern relations was also gaining in strength.

In the parliament in 1196 the sons of Sturla Þórðarson, the Sturlungs, were among the most important allies of Sæmundr and his brothers. Their father had been a cunning politician from West Iceland, noted for his rhetorical abilities and his Machiavellian manipulation of every situation to his advantage. He was nevertheless only one chieftain among many, and at his death in 1183 his three sons by Guðný Böðvarsdóttir were still very young. In little less than a decade, however, they managed to carve out a regional lordship for themselves, similar to those arising in North and South Iceland. Partly this was due to the political

[12] On the rise of the family of Kolbeinn, the Ásbirningar, see H. Þorláksson: *Milli Skarðs og Feykis. Um valdasamþjöppun í Hegranesþingi í tíð Ásbirninga og um valdamiðstöðvar þeirra*. "Saga" 2008, Vol. 46(2), pp. 51—93.

[13] See H. Þorláksson: *Gamlar götur og goðavald. Um fornar leiðir og völd Oddaverja í Rangárþingi*. Reykjavík 1989.

acumen of their mother, who through a personal and political relationship with the chieftain Ari Þorgilsson, grandson of his namesake the historian, managed to secure a chieftaincy for her oldest son, Þórðr Snorrason. But the rivals of the Sturlungs in West Iceland were also weakened by the ban against priests serving as chieftains. The scions of the chieftain families at Staðarhóll and Skarð devoted themselves to a career within the Church, thus clearing the way for the Sturlungs.[14]

The brother of Þórðr, Sighvatr Sturluson, was a close collaborator of his brother in the beginning, for instance in the strife in the parliament in 1196. However, as a step towards the settlement of this quarrel, Sighvatr made a proposal of marriage to Halldóra Tumadóttir, the sister of Kolbeinn Tumason and the granddaughter of Gizur Hallsson. In the subsequent few years, Sighvatr became a trusted ally of his in-laws, especially Kolbeinn Tumason and Sigurðr Ormsson. This went against the position taken by his brother who had allied himself with Sæmundr Jónsson.

In 1201 Brandr Sæmundarson, the bishop at Hólar, died. At which time a cleric noted for his saintly habits, Guðmundr Arason, was elected bishop by the farmers in Skagafjörðr. Behind the choice of the farmers was a political move by Kolbeinn Tumason, who wanted his stepfather to run the see at Hólar in a similar manner as Gizur Hallsson had done at Skálholt. Sigurðr Ormsson wanted to move to the North following his humiliation by Sæmundr Jónsson, and a visitation to the East by Guðmundr Arason was used to seal the deal. It was also around this time that Guðmundr Þorvaldsson retired to a monastery, and Sigurðr Ormsson took over his chieftaincies. Kolbeinn and Sigurðr had become powerful lords of the North and hoped to use Bishop Guðmundr to consolidate their power in the region even further.

This initial alliance between the lords Kolbeinn and Sigurðr, and Bishop Guðmundr quickly went awry, as the Bishop felt constrained by the chieftains. The issue that became the point of contention, ecclesiastical jurisdiction over priests, was only a singular manifestation of a more broad phenomenon, that the regional lords felt the church as an institution should be under their control, and the bishop should be content to act as more of a spiritual guide. Guðmundr Arason, who was descended from an old chieftain family, was not content with playing such a modest role. The issue came to a head in 1208 when Kolbeinn Tumason came to Hólar with a force but was killed in a scuffle with the bishop's men. This was the start of a long-standing feud between bishop Guðmundr and the family of Kolbeinn, the most powerful family in Iceland.

In 1209 a band of Icelandic lords led by Arnór Tumason, the brother of Kolbeinn, and Þorvaldr Gizurarson, their uncle, descended upon Hólar and

[14] See S. Jakobsson: *Konur og völd í Breiðafirði á miðöldum*. "Skírnir" 2013, Vol. 187(1), pp. 161—175.

took the bishop into custody, killing some of his most unruly followers. This led to a crisis in the Hólar diocese and, ultimately, to an intervention by the archbishop in Niðarós. In his letter, the archbishop, while condemning the treatment of Bishop Guðmundr, did not take his side in the quarrels with his enemies but urged restraint on the part of everyone. This indicates that the archbishop did not see this as an ideological conflict between ecclesiastical and secular power but more of a personal quarrel. It should also be noted that some of the chieftains, Þorvaldr Gizurarson in particular, had actually taken the initiative in appealing to the archbishop. Guðmundr Arason went to Norway in 1214, having been largely ineffective as a bishop in the preceding time.

When Bishop Guðmundr returned in 1218, Sigurðr Ormsson had retired to a monastery and Sighvatr Sturluson had taken over his lordship over Eyjafjörðr. Thus, he and his brother-in-law, Arnór Tumason, became Bishop Guðmundr's principal antagonists in the following years, as they were determined to limit his control over the diocese of Hólar. Guðmundr was however supported by some farmers and one chieftain in particular, Þórðr Sturluson, Sighvatr's brother. This led to a break between the Sturlungs which never healed. It was Þórðr Sturluson who was instrumental in securing Guðmundr's position at Hólar against the wishes of the local lords.[15] In 1221, Arnór Tumason died in Norway and his position in Skagafjörðr was usurped by Tumi Sighvatsson, the oldest son of Sighvatr. Tumi was killed by the men of Guðmundr in 1222, thus instigating a new blood feud. Sighvatr and his second son, Sturla Sighvatsson, chased the bishop to the island of Grímsey and managed to capture him there, sending him into exile again. Some of the bishop's supporters were killed but others sought refuge. One of them, Aron Hjörleifsson, a particular nemesis of Sighvatr and Sturla, was protected by the clients of Þórðr Sturluson. Thus began the strife of the Sturlungs which defined politics in Iceland for the next decade and a half.

The self-destruction of the Icelandic elite

In Icelandic historiography, the age between 1220 and 1262 is generally regarded as a new period in the political history of Iceland. It is character-

[15] On Þórðr Sturluson and his "thalassocracy" in the Breiðafjörður region, see H. Þorláksson: *Ódrjúghálsar og sæbrautir. Um samgöngur og völd við Breiðafjörð á fyrri tíð*. "Saga" 2013, Vol. 51(1), pp. 94—128.

ised by the political struggles between a few families who had taken control over most of the country by 1220. The most prominent of these families was that of the Sturlungs, and the era is thus usually called the Sturlung Age (Icelandic *Sturlungaöld*). In fact, the intra-familial squabbles of the Sturlungs were the most prominent feature of political life in the country until 1237, after which the main contest for power was between a few grandsons and great-grandsons of Gizur Hallsson. From 1235 onwards the Icelandic lords fought each other viciously, which resulted in the decimation of their numbers.

It requires some explanation why these few families, which had become so powerful at the cost of all others in a period of less than 30 years, would choose to decimate each other in constant warfare instead of enjoying the territorial power they had acquired at the expense of other chieftains and the farmers who supported them with tributes such as the sheep-toll (ON *sauðakvöð*) and cheese-toll (ON *ostatollr*).[16] One explanation might be that the system was inherently unstable, as it had no tradition behind it and no legal recognition. The lord ruled on behalf of other chieftains, who were still considered the legitimate owners of their chieftaincies. An example of the inherent instability of the system is the quarrel between the Sturlungs, who became each other's chief rivals at the very point in time when their power in Iceland reached its zenith.

Mention has already been made of the break between Þórðr Sturluson and Sighvatr Sturluson on account of their different attitudes towards Bishop Guðmundr Arason. The third brother, Snorri Sturluson, had become even more powerful due to his influence with the family of Sæmundr Jónsson, the Oddaverjar. Snorri had usurped power from his mother's kinsmen in the Borgarfjörðr region but as he had been raised by Jón Loftsson in Oddi, he and Sæmundr were foster-brothers. This, however, did not stop Snorri Sturluson from becoming the biggest rival of Sæmundr following his election as lawspeaker in 1215. Snorri then went to Norway in 1218 where he became the courtier of Earl Skúli Bárðarson, who was then the most powerful man in Norway. Skúli was planning an expedition to Iceland on account of skirmishes that had occurred there between Norwegian merchants and the family of Sæmundr Jónsson. Snorri dissuaded the Earl from this, and claimed that he would settle the issue as the king's representative in Iceland. He was thus made a royal vassal (ON *lendr maðr*). The plan of Snorri was, however, mainly to increase his own power. He goaded a kinsman of Sæmundr, Loftr Pálsson, into killing his relative by marriage, Björn Þorvaldsson, in 1221. Björn was the son of Þorvaldr Gizurarson and the slaying of his son put the

[16] See H. Þorláksson: *Gamlar götur og goðavald*…, pp. 86—97; J.V. Sigurðsson: *Frá goðorðum til ríkja*…, p. 107.

Oddaverjar in great trouble. Following the death of Sæmundr in 1222, his sons felt they had no recourse but to make Snorri the chief arbiter concerning his inheritance, a position he used to advance the claim of Sæmundr's daughter, Solveig Sæmundsdóttir. Soon after, Sturla Sighvatsson married Solveig, much to Snorri's chagrin, although he soon found another wife from the clan, Hallveig Ormsdóttir, the widow of Björn Þorvaldsson and the wealthiest woman in Iceland.

These marriage politics placed Snorri in opposition to his nephew, and another bone of contention was the old chieftaincy of the Sturlungs which was being held by Sturla. Snorri and his brother, Þórðr Sturluson, made an alliance to wring the chieftaincy out of the hands of Sturla. This resulted in a long-standing tug of war where these close kinsmen fought each other, mostly through proxies.[17] The sons of Hrafn Sveinbjarnarson, long-time allies of Þórðr Sturluson, finally allied themselves with Sturla Sighvatsson and in 1228 they killed the chieftain Þorvaldr Snorrason who by that time had become the son-in-law and ally of Snorri Sturluson. This resulted in a direct attack on Sauðafell, the manor of Sturla, by the adult sons of Þorvaldr, but they only succeeded in maiming and killing women and less fit men, as Sturla was away at the time with most of his retinue. In 1232, Sturla avenged himself by killing the sons of Þorvaldr, but their chieftaincy in the Westfjords was inherited by their brother who was still a minor and was under the control of his mother, Snorri's daughter Þórdís. Snorri Sturluson was thus becoming more powerful every year and he cemented his status by the marriage of his two other daughters to the young chieftains Kolbeinn Arnórsson, son of Arnór Tumason, and Gizur Þorvaldsson, son of Þorvaldr Gizurarson. However, these alliances went awry as both marriages collapsed.

In 1233 Sturla went to Rome to atone for the misdeeds against Bishop Guðmundr Arason in Grímsey. This was the result of a more forceful policy by Archbishop Sigurðr Eindriðason, who wanted to secure the immunity of clerics from violence.[18] He was largely successful in these efforts, for instance Guðmundr Arason was allowed to live in peace at Hólar in the last years of his long life, and he died there in 1237. On his way back, Sturla Sighvatsson went to meet the Norwegian king Hákon Hákonarson, and he offered to become his agent in the pacification of Iceland. Sturla's plan was to become sole ruler of Iceland as the king's official.

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[17] See T.H. Tulinius: *Snorri og bræður hans. Framgangur og átök Sturlusona í félagslegu rými þjóðveldisins*. "Ný saga" 2000, Vol. 12, pp. 49—60.

[18] On the peace efforts of the Church in Iceland, see S. Jakobsson: *Friðarviðleitni kirkjunnar á 13. öld* "Saga" 1998, Vol. 36, pp. 7—46; Idem: *The Peace of God in Iceland in the 12th and 13th centuries*. In: *Sacri canones servandi sunt. Ius canonicum et status ecclesiae saeculis XIII—XV* (Opera Instituti historici Pragae. Series C — Miscellanea, Vol. 19). Ed. P. Krafl. Prague 2008, pp. 205—213.

In 1236 he struck against his cousin Órækja Snorrason, the son of Snorri Sturluson, who had usurped his sister's domain in the Westfjords.[19] Órækja and his father left the country and went to stay with Skúli Bárðarson, who by then had become a duke (ON *hertogi*) in Norway. Their ally, Þorleifur Þórðarson, fought against Sturla Sighvatsson at Bær in Borgarfjörðr, but the battle resulted in a victory for Sturla. Sturla then wanted to secure the allegiance of Gizur Þorvaldsson and captured him with trickery at a meeting in South Iceland in 1238. Gizur was made to swear an oath of allegiance to Sturla and was held captive. However, he was released by his captors and made a formal alliance with his first cousin once removed, Kolbeinn Arnórsson. Kolbeinn and Sturla were also cousins, but Kolbeinn had begun to resent the dominance of Sighvatr Sturluson in the North and saw an opportunity to advance in status.

In August 1238, the armies of Sighvatur Sturluson and Sturla Sighvatsson met the forces of Gizur Þorvaldsson and Kolbeinn Tumason in Skagafjörðr. The result was a routed Sturlung army, and the deaths of both Sighvatr and Sturla in battle.[20] Consequently, Kolbeinn became the sole ruler of the North, but Gizur did not seek any territorial gains at this moment. In 1239 Snorri and Órækja returned to Iceland from Norway and gathered the remaining leaders of the Sturlungs, such as Sturla Þórðarson, the son of Þórðr Sturluson, and Tumi Sighvatsson, the youngest son of Sighvatr Sturluson. However, Snorri's return from Norway coincided with the revolt of Skúli Bárðarson against King Hákon Hákonarson, and the king was suspicious of Snorri on account of his long-standing relationshiop with Skúli. He thus sent Snorri an order to remain in Norway which Snorri disobeyed. The king then contacted Gizur Þorvaldsson who was also his retainer. Gizur must have been in serious trouble with the king on account of his slaying of Sturla Sighvatsson, the king's representative in Iceland. In *Hákonar saga* or *Sturlunga saga*, the main narrative sources concerning the events of the period, there is no indication that Gizur knew anything about the mission of Sturla when he decided to become his chief adversary. However, it seems very unlikely that such a mission could be kept completely under wraps, and in Sturlunga it is claimed that Sturla made Gizur swear a Norwegian oath of allegiance, which must have indicated that Sturla was acting on behalf of the king. When Gizur received letters from King Hákon concerning the treachery of Snorri, he must have regarded this as a chance to redeem himself with the king. Thus, Snorri was killed by agents of Gizur in September 1241, but Órækja was later captured and sent to Norway to make

[19] See K.E. Gade: *1236: Órækia meiddr ok heill gerr*. In: *Níunda alþjóðlega fornsagnaþingið*. Akureyri 31.7—6.8.1994 (1st pre-print), pp. 194—207.

[20] See Ú. Bragason: *Hetjudauði Sturlu Sighvatssonar*. "Skírnir" 1986, Vol. 160, pp. 64—78; H. Pálsson: *Á Örlygsstöðum. Grafist fyrir um eðli Íslendingasögu*. "Saga" 2001, Vol. 39, pp. 169—206.

his peace with King Hákon.[21] However, Gizur made no effort at this point to assume the task of Sturla and act as the king's representative in Iceland.

The dominance of Gizur Þorvaldsson and Kolbeinn Arnórsson was, however, severely threatened when Þórðr Sighvatsson, the brother of Sturla, returned to Iceland from Norway in 1242, where he had served King Hákon as a retainer. Þórðr quickly established his authority among old followers of the Sturlungs in West Iceland, despite constant harassment on behalf of Kolbeinn, who managed to kill his brother Tumi in 1244. Þórðr responded by gathering a fleet of warships and sailing from the Westfjords where they were met by the ships of Kolbeinn at Húnaflói in 1244. The result was a naval battle which ended in a pyrrhic victory for Kolbeinn, who nevertheless lost more men in the fighting. This resulted in negotiations in which Þórðr managed to gain a foothold in his father's old domain in Eyjafjörðr. The death of Kolbeinn in 1245 brought to power his cousin Brandr Kolbeinsson who soon became the chief antagonist of Þórðr. Their armies clashed at Haugsnes in 1246 in a fierce battle which ended with the death of Brandr.

Þórðr Sighvatsson had by now become the sole ruler of North Iceland, but he was still opposed by Gizur Þorvaldsson in the South. As they were both retainers of King Hákon they decided to sail to Norway and appeal to the king to resolve their differences. Thus, King Hákon became the most important actor in the politics of Iceland.

"Phoenix from the ashes": The regeneration of the Icelandic aristocracy

In 1247 King Hákon Hákonarson of Norway, on the advice of Cardinal William of Sabina, decided to send Þórðr Sighvatsson to Iceland to make the Icelanders subject to the Norwegian crown. The new bishop at Hólar, Heinrekr Kársson, was supposed to assist Þórðr in this task. Gizur Þorvaldsson was kept in Norway in service of the king. Þórðr was largely successful in pacifying the countries. He relied heavily on the traditional followers of the Sturlungs in West Iceland as well as in the Eyjafjörðr region. Among the chieftains who joined Þórðr in his efforts to consolidate control was Sæmundr Ormsson at Svínafell in East Iceland. He was married to Ingunn, a daughter of Sturla Sigh-

[21] See Á. Jakobsson: *Snorri and His Death: Youth, Violence, and Autobiography in Medieval Iceland*. "Scandinavian Studies" 2003, Vol. 75, pp. 317—340.

vatsson. Another daughter of Sturla, Þuríður, was married to Hrafn Oddsson, an upcoming chieftain from the Westfjords.

However, Bishop Heinrekr claimed that Þórðr was not acting on behalf of the king, only himself. Due to this, King Hákon summoned Þórðr to Norway in 1250 and he obeyed. From then on it was evident that no lord could rule Iceland without the support of the king. In 1250—1251 various chieftains were at the court of the king, vying for his favour.[22] In the end, he gave the task of asserting royal authority in Iceland to three men, Gizur Þorvaldsson, Þorgils Böðvarsson and Finnbjörn Helgason. Of these three lords, Gizur was descended from the South, Þorgils from the West, and Finnbjörn from the East, and each of them was supposed to be the king's representative in his respective quarter.

Furthermore, Gizur Þorvaldsson was evidently expected to gain control of the North as he went to Skagafjörðr to take possession of the lands of his kinsmen there. He seems to have quickly gained the trust of Jórunn Kálfsdóttir, the widow of Brandr Kolbeinsson, and the leading farmers in the region, some of whom were his personal acquaintances. However, Þorgils Böðvarsson did not have any success in the region of Borgarfjörðr where the king laid claim to the lands of Snorri Sturluson. The farmers there were loath to follow the lead of Þorgils. In 1253 Gizur made an effort to reconcile himself with the leading followers of Þórðr Sighvatsson in the West, Hrafn Oddsson and Sturla Þórðarson. A marriage was arranged between Hallr, son of Gizur, and Ingibjörg, daughter of Sturla. These designs came to nothing when Eyjólfr Þorsteinsson, a follower of Þórðr Sighvatsson, burned down Gizur's farm in Skagafjörðr in 1253, killing his wife and three sons. Eyjólfr was married to an illegitimate daughter of Sturla Sighvatsson and was pursuing a blood feud against Gizur for the killing of Sturla. Following this event, Hrafn Oddsson allied himself with Eyjólfr, and a group of Þórðr Sighvatsson's now formed an active opposition to Gizur. In 1254, Gizur left Iceland and placed the region of Skagafjörðr under the control of Oddr Þórarinsson, a cousin of Sæmundr Ormsson who had been killed in 1252. Oddr and his brother Þorvarðr vied for power in East Iceland, each allying themselves with a different faction. Bishop Heinrekr had soon turned into an active enemy of Gizur, just as he had previously done with Þórðr Sighvatsson, and in 1255 Oddr Þórarinsson decided to take him captive in order to reinforce his control over Skagafjörðr. This was met with active opposition by farmers in the region, unlike what had happened in the days of Bishop Guðmundr. Oddr had to release the Bishop and soon after he was killed by Hrafn Oddsson and Eyjólfr Þorsteinsson. This led to an alliance between Þorvarðr Þórarinsson, the brother of Oddr, and Þorgils Böðvarsson, and

[22] See *Íslenzk fornrit*, Vol. 32. In: *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar II, Magnúss saga lagabœtis*. Eds. S. Jakobsson, Þ. Hauksson, T. Ulset. Reykjavík 2013, p. 153.

they managed to defeat Eyjólfr and Hrafn in a battle in Eyjafjörðr. Eyjólfr was killed, but Hrafn managed to escape. Finnbjörn Helgason died of his wounds after the battle, making Þorgils the sole surviving representative of the king in Iceland.[23]

Following this showdown, Þorgils Böðvarsson was accepted as lord of Skagafjörðr, as he was the nephew on his mother's side of the late Kolbeinn Arnórsson. Þorgils managed to reconcile himself with Bishop Heinrekr, and due to pressure from the courtier Ívar Englason, he got the farmers in Skagafjörðr and Eyjafjörðr to acknowledge the authority of the king in 1256. This was the first case of regions in Iceland openly submitting to King Hákon, but he also continued to lay claim to Borgarfjörðr, due to the fact that Snorri Sturluson had been his landed vassal.

The authority of the king was not acknowledged by all. Þorgils Böðvarsson claimed lordship over the Eyjafjörðr region as the king's representative. However, similar claims were made by Steinvör Sighvatsdóttir, as the sister and chief inheritor of Þórðr Sighvatsson. Steinvör appointed her son-in-law, Þorvarðr Þórarinsson, as her representative in the region and he killed Þorgils in 1258. This deed made him unpopular and he soon had to leave Eyjafjörðr. The king was thus left without representatives in Iceland, since the West was controlled by Hrafn Oddsson and the East by Þorvarðr Þórarinsson, neither of them a retainer of the king.

It seems that King Hákon had decided to place his trust in Þórðr Sighvatsson again, but he died in 1256 before he could return to Iceland. This limited the king's options so that he had to use the only recourse left available to him, to make Gizur Þorvaldsson his representative again. To sweeten the deal, Gizur was made an earl and appointed ruler of Skagafjörðr, Eyjafjörðr, and Borgarfjörðr, the only regions the king could claim as his own as of yet. However, Gizur was supposed to win over the farmers of the remaining regions of Iceland as well, so as to get the farmers to submit to taxation. In the former, Gizur had some moderate success, as he managed to gain allegiance from the farmers in Rangárþing in South Iceland. He also tried to bring Borgarfjörðr under his control by appointing Sturla Þórðarson his representative there. However, it seems that Gizur was loath to bring up the subject of taxation to the farmers.

In 1261 King Hákon decided to increase the pressure on Gizur by sending another courtier, Hallvarðr gullskór, to Iceland and appointing Hrafn Oddsson

[23] On the political situation in Iceland in the 1250s, see H. Þorláksson: *Stórbændur gegn goðum. Hugleiðingar um goðavald, konungsvald og sjálfræðishug bænda um miðbik 13. aldar*. In: *Söguslóðir Afmælisrit helgað Ólafi Hanssyni sjötugum 18. septemper 1979*. Reykjavík 1979, pp. 227—250; G. Karlsson: *Völd og auður á 13. öld*. "Saga" 1980, Vol. 18, pp. 5—30; H. Þorláksson: *Stétt, auður og völd á 12. og 13. öld*. "Saga" 1982, Vol. 20, pp. 63—113.

the lord of Borgarfjörðr. By securing the allegiance of Hrafn, the king had more options than relying entirely on Gizur, who was now caught between a rock and a hard place, between the king and the farmers who formed the core of his support.[24] In 1262, the king was accepted as ruler of Iceland by chieftains and farmers in North and West Iceland, as well as a part of the South, Gizur's home region of Árnesþing. In 1263, the chieftains and farmers of Árnesþing followed suit and in 1264 the chieftains and farmers from East Iceland. Þorvarðr Þórarinsson went to Norway to submit to the new king, Magnús Hákonarson, because Hákon Hákonarson died in 1263, never having become the ruler of the whole of Iceland.[25]

Gizur Þorvaldsson had the title of earl until his death in 1268, but it is doubtful whether he actually ruled all of Iceland. In the West, Hrafn Oddsson, seems to have been all-powerful and it is likely that Þorvarðr Þórarinsson and his cousin, Ormr Ormsson, enjoyed similar positions in the East. The actual position of Iceland was not decided until 1270—1271 when Hrafn Oddsson and Ormr Ormsson were appointed governors (ON *sýslumenn*) and a new lawbook, composed by Sturla Þórðarson, was granted to the country. Þorvarðr Þórarinsson soon succeeded his kinsman Ormr (who died in 1270) as governor, so that in the 1270s, Hrafn and Þorvarðr were the most important royal officials in Iceland with Sturla Þórðarson in the new office of lawman, succeeding the old honorary position of the law-speaker. Things hardly seemed to have changed at all in Iceland from the time of the Icelandic Commonwealth.

Although Iceland had become integrated into the Norwegian administration it remained separate from Norway in some respects, most importantly in the law.[26] Magnús Hákonarsson is widely celebrated as the great harmoniser of the laws of the Norwegian kingdom, creating a state more unified in its laws than any other in Europe at the time. In this, Iceland, became an exception. The code brought to Iceland by Sturla Þórðarson was soon revised by Jón Einarsson, former law-speaker and possibly a nephew of Gizur Þorvaldsson. The new legal code, Jónsbók, was actually more similar to the traditional Icelandic laws than Sturla's code had been, at a time when the laws of all other parts

[24] See J.M. Samsonarson: *Var Gissur Þorvaldsson jarl yfir öllu Íslandi?* "Saga" 1954—1958), Vol. 2, pp. 326—365.

[25] In the documents pertaining to the submission of the Icelanders to Norway, see P.P. Boulhosa: *Icelanders and the Kings of Norway. Medieval Sagas and Legal Texts*. In: *The Northern World. North Europe and the Baltic c. 400—1700 AD. Peoples, Economies and Cultures*. Vol. 17. Leiden—Boston 2005.

[26] On the government of Iceland in the first decades of Norwegian rule, see J.V. Sigurðsson: *The Icelandic Aristocracy after the Fall of the Free State*. "Scandinavian Journal of History" 1995, Vol. 20(2), pp. 153—166; S. Beck: *I kungens frånvaro: formeringen av en isländsk aristokrati 1271—1387*. Gothenbug 2011; R.B. Wærdahl: *The Incorporation and Integration of the King's Tributary Lands into the Norwegian Realm c. 1195—1397*. Leiden 2011.

of Norway were becoming more harmonious. We cannot be sure about why this was the case, but it can be conjectured that Icelanders had not been happy with the new law code, and King Magnús was trying to accommodate their concerns by having Jón Einarsson revise the law code. By doing so, he made Iceland very distinct from other parts of Norway, a decision that had important consequences in the centuries to come.

Conclusion: The territorialisation of power in Iceland

In the 11th century there was no country in Europe where the charismatic and personal authority of secular and ecclesiastical leaders was more important, due to the complete absence of territorial power, than in Iceland. This changed in the 12th and 13th centuries, firstly with the establishment of clerical hierarchies and a parish system finished by the tithe, secondly by the creation of regional lordships in the 1190s, coinciding with the legal separation of secular and ecclesiastical offices. It was the regional lords and their rivalries that characterised the early, turbulent decades of the 13th century, the most interesting and terrible times of Icelandic history. The processes of this political competition are interesting in their own right, as I have tried to demonstrate in my account of the rivalries within this very narrowly-defined elite. Everyone involved in the major quarrels of the age was either related to or connected in marriage to the families of Gizur Hallsson or the Sturlungs or, rather typically, to both. This did not stop these lords from fighting each other or killing each other but it often complicated the issue.

In the 1220s and 1230s both Snorri Sturluson and Sturla Sighvatsson tried to involve the Norwegian king in these rivalries, to their own advantage, but both failed in their efforts. Snorri's involvement in Norwegian politics was probably the main reason for his violent death in 1241. Following 1247, however, the king became the most important arbiter in Icelandic politics, it was impossible to gain any authority in the country without his support. However, the king also needed the support of Icelandic lords to enforce his agenda, as we can see by his decision to promote Hrafn Oddsson in 1261, without him ever having been the king's retainer or supporter. By making Hrafn and Þorvarðr Þórarinsson his chief officials in Iceland, Magnús Hákonarson demonstrated the same political acumen as his father had shown before him. In order to rule Iceland the king needed above all the support of those lords who had

hitherto kept their distance from the king. In a game of high political stakes, loyalty was not its own reward, being politically useful was. Magnús Hákonarson proved equally cunning when he allowed Iceland to follow its own path in law-making so that the new laws of Jónsbók became at the same time a manifestation of submission to the king as well as a demonstration of independence.

Sverrir Jakobsson

Między władzą możnych a władzą państwa
Przemiany polityczne w Islandii w latach 1096—1281

Streszczenie

Islandię XI wieku charakteryzowała wyjątkowa organizacja polityczno-prawna na tle ówczesnej Europy. Nie było tam ani centralnej, ani terytorialnej władzy wykonawczej, czy to świeckiej, czy duchownej.

Wprowadzona w 1096 roku dziesięcina była pierwszym regularnym podatkiem w Islandii. Miała ona decydujący wpływ na zmiany w organizacji tamtejszego Kościoła. Ponadto zapoczątkowała istotne przemiany w funkcjonowaniu islandzkiej społeczności, która stopniowo traciła swój anachroniczny charakter i coraz bardziej zaczynała upodabniać się do innych europejskich wspólnot.

Autor artykułu stara się odpowiedzieć na szereg istotnych w tym kontekście pytań: jaką rolę odegrał islandzki Kościół w adaptowaniu nowego spojrzenia na władzę i jej funkcjonowanie? W jaki sposób zmiany te obrazowało nowe podejście elit wśród islandzkich osadników do egzekwowania prawa? W końcu: dlaczego, wobec politycznych wstrząsów na wyspie, jakie z owymi zmianami się wiązały, podległość królowi Norwegii okazała się jedynym słusznym rozwiązaniem?

Sverrir Jakobsson

Zwischen der Macht der Adeligen und der Staatsmacht
Politischer Wandel in Island in den Jahren 1096—1281

Zusammenfassung

Im 11. Jahrhundert war Island im Vergleich mit damaligem Europa durch spezifische politisch-rechtliche Organisation gekennzeichnet. Es gab dort weder zentrale noch territoriale Exekutive, weder weltliche noch geistliche Macht.

Die im Jahre 1096 eingeführte Kirchensteuer war im Grunde genommen die erste reguläre Steuer in Island. Das Phänomen war für die Änderungen in der Organisation der isländischen Kirche ausschlaggebend. Darüber hinaus brachte die Kirchensteuer in Gang wichtige Änderungen im Funktionieren der isländischen Gemeinschaft, die ihren anachronistischen Charakter allmählich loswurde und begann, sich an andere europäische Gemeinschaften anzupassen.

Der Verfasser versucht, eine ganze Reihe von den im Zusammenhang damit wichtigen Fragen zu beantworten: welche Rolle spielte die isländische Kirche bei Verbreitung neuer Betrachtungsweise der Macht und deren Funktion? Auf welche Weise fanden diese Änderungen ihre Widerspiegelung in neuer Einstellung der Elite der isländischen Kolonisten zum Gesetzesvollzug auf der Insel? Und letztendlich: warum erwies sich die Abhängigkeit von König von Norwegen angesichts der mit dem politischen Wandel verbundenen Erschütterungen auf der Insel als die einzige richtige Lösung?